

INTERNATIONAL

Fit for a ^[17]~~sep~~ fairytale

As Belle and friends prepare to grace the silver screen again, *Liz Rowlinson* wishes upon a star for the most magical castle of all



A 10-bedroom chateau in Poitiers is €2.4m with Leggett

This week sees the launch of the new film version of *Beauty and the Beast*, one of the most eagerly anticipated releases of 2017. With a starry cast including Emma Watson, Ewan McGregor and Emma Thompson, much of the drama is set in the realm of the Beast's grand castle, which, in the 1991 Disney adaptation of the French novel, was modelled on the Loire Valley's Château de Chambord.

A 16th-century royal hunting lodge built in the French Renaissance style, Château de Chambord is one of the biggest castles in France. Even the real thing is magical, with 11 types of roof tower, 440 rooms and 84 staircases, including the spellbinding double helix staircase, reportedly designed by Leonardo da Vinci for King Francis I. It allowed visitors to come and go in secrecy.

Buyers from all over the world have been seduced by the notion of owning a French castle – but does the reality live up to the fairy tale?

As well as castles, the term *château* includes buildings as diverse as medieval fortresses, Renaissance palaces and the sort of country houses we call stately homes. There are more than 1,000 in the Dordogne alone, over 300 in the Loire, hundreds in Provence, the Alps and Brittany – in fact, they are hardly in short supply. Prices range from around €404,250 (£350,850) for an eight-bedroom “petit château” with a swimming pool in the Poitou-Charentes region, to €20 million for a grandiose 17-bedroom palace next to a lake and chestnut forests in Aquitaine.

Many purchasers like the idea of owning a piece of history, but the appeal of the château is broader, says Tim Swannie of French agent Home Hunts. “Status is important for some buyers – the French château fits nicely alongside the Alpine chalet, Tuscan farmhouse and city penthouse – but that is far from being the main driver for most of our buyers,” he says.

“Location is generally the main appeal; they were specifically built in the best positions, with the best views, by the most important landowners of the time. Size also matters – they generally offer vast entertaining spaces, lots of bedrooms and huge amounts of land, too.”

Swannie says that people will either buy a château because it comes with vineyards or because they are ideal properties to run as hotels, b&bs, holiday rentals or yoga retreats. Some of these buyers are investors, but most are owner-occupiers with a passion for the property’s features and history.

“We are starting to see an increase in the number of Britons interested in starting a new life here,” he says. “We are currently working with several families, in one case two British families buying together, who are looking for a French château to renovate, with separate gîtes/holiday rentals in the grounds.”



Victoria Wills's château in Richelieu is €1.7m with Leggett

Some of the most substantial examples on the market have been in the same French families for centuries. A 12th-century, 25-bedroom chalet in Périgueux, in the Dordogne, has been in the Fayolle family for 900 years and is still a much-loved family home.

The original 1143 property was rebuilt in 1740, and the main building includes a 689 sq ft salon, a banqueting hall, its very own theatre, the requisite sweeping stone staircase and dozens of subterranean passages linking the cellars.

Aubusson tapestries and Chinoiserie wallpaper – once removed and exhibited at New York’s Metropolitan Museum of Art – are just two of the historically significant details. Sitting in 1,310 acres of land, it is now for sale for the first time, at €15.54 million through Leggett.

The agency also has plenty of handsome châteaux for less than €2million. It was the affordability that attracted châtelaine Victoria Wills, 42, when she was seeking a property in France to host a health retreat seven years ago. The Chiswick-based entrepreneur, who runs the holistic boot camp retreat NuBeginnings in North Devon, paid €1.7 million for a 12-bedroom property that was originally part of Cardinal Richelieu’s château in the Loire. The rest was torn down during the French Revolution.

“I wasn’t shopping for a château, I just wanted a beautiful building in peaceful surroundings, but when I realised that I could afford it, there was no turning back,” she says. “I just fell in love instantly – it was unbelievably good value.”

Wills spent £300,000 refurbishing the property and installing an efficient woodchip boiler system, reducing the running costs to roughly €6,000 per year. It was tortuous French employment law that killed off her retreat business in the end, and she now runs it as a wedding venue and holiday rental. “It would be great for a family but I am here on my own and I feel like Miss Havisham,” she says. It is for sale at €1.7million through Leggett.

The reality of owning an historic property is something that prospective owners need to appreciate, and maintaining a good roof is key, says Swannie.

“On top of the sales price you need to add renovation costs, and if the property is listed these costs are usually higher than average,” he adds. “Plus running costs – hefty utility bills but also live-in staff to keep on top of daily maintenance.”

If you are seeking to run your château as a business, also consider the location carefully: where will your guests come from, and what else is there to draw them to the area? “You really need to be within 30 minutes of a motorway and train station and within an hour of an airport,” says Alan Fuller of Leggett. “In the Loire we have vineyards, golf courses, two of the very best theme parks and one of the top zoos in the world.”

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